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AUTHOR	Hilyard, Delmar M.
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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews Bowling Green State University's participation in community service activities particularly as it applies to the speech communications departments. Emphasis is placed on the traditional view of community service, the objective of community service, the Bowling Green State University Chicano Program, speech education for community service roles, and the community service mission. Reproduced from best available copy. (MJM)

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COMMUNITY SERVICE AS ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

Delmar M. Hilyard

Bowling Green State University

The identification of Bowling Green State University with urban institutions may appear to be one of the more whimsical incongruities of 1972. For those who do not know, BGSU is located in a town of 22,000 in a predominantly agricultural county of Northwest Ohio. Toledo is 25 miles away; if you have visited there, you may even have some scepticism about Toledo's urbanity; and in any case, Toledo has its own university as does every other major city in Ohio.

However, the incongruity is superficial or, at least temporary. Developments in recent years suggest that the university is moving away from its identification as a rural retreat and toward an urban-orientation. The university and the university town lie within the limits of the megapolitan sprawl of population around Lake Erie. Population growth data indicates that the area can expect increased numbers of residents and higher population densities in the future. The town participates in the Metropolitan Council of Governments, a coordinating group which views and copes with problems which transcend city, county and even the Michigan-Ohio political boundaries.

Some political leaders have argued for a University of Northwest Ohio through consolidating BGSU and others into one administrative unit. Whether or not such an organization should evolve is being debated, but this year the University of Toledo and BGSU have merged their computer capabilities and services into one cooperatively administered unit. Also, one of the major programs of the College of Education is an intra-urban teacher training program in Toledo's poverty areas. Such developments rather clearly suggest that the tranquil teachers college posture of an earlier era is no longer relevant.

Justifying participation in this action caucus is not the only reason for citing information about Bowling Green. The citations are also meant to illustrate the perspective which is necessary for all individuals interested in the community service role of speech communication departments. That perspective recognizes the plausibility of some of Alvin Toffler's ideas regarding "future shock" and takes into account the likely directions of community change. Such a future-oriented perspective requires some reexamination of what we mean by the term community service.

Traditional View of Community Service

Traditionally, service has been the miscellaneous category of the trichotomy of academic functions. If it was not teaching or research, then it must have been service. Teaching was defined by interaction with students, and research was defined by interaction with editors and publishers. Service was anything else an academician did with the sanction either of his department or of the Kiwanis Club or both.

At Bowling Green service activities have included a speech and hearing clinic, a public television and radio broadcast service, play productions for public and public schools, and programs of debate speaking and oral interpretation provided to community groups. In other words the department has an extensive record of consistent interaction with its community. Most departments with which I am acquainted can produce a similar list of service activities. In general, speech communication departments are probably as service oriented as any academic area that can be named.

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The reciprocal nature of social rewards does raise the question of whether these activities are community service or community exploitation. For example, many program presentations before community groups are justified primarily as "worthwhile practice sessions for student performers." Similarly, community audiences often disappear from university theaters as increased student enrollments claim priority on auditorium seats. And speech clinicians increasingly operate as training supervisors of their undergraduate apprentices. When such a state of affairs evolves it creates some doubt regarding who has been providing service for whom.

It appears useless to attempt to determine if a given speech communication department is the initiator or the victim of circumstances under such conditions of community service. In either case the outcome appears to be the consequence of the traditional prevailing attitude regarding academic responsibilities and priorities. The attitude which has predominantly contributed to the confusion about service or exploitation has three component features which require consideration and adjustment. One component is the academic reward system which generally assigns lower priority to service activities than it does to teaching and research. It would seem almost inevitable that decisions would be made and rationales developed on the criteria of research and teaching promotional growth.

A second feature is the assumption by both town and gown of an ivory tower passivity, aloofness or isolation from community affairs. Obviously there has always been a university/community interface, but both social entities have traditionally maintained relatively segregated networks of social interaction.

A third component of the dominant attitude toward community service is the tendency to consider service in terms of short-range goals and/or restricted problems. The typical perspective has been that if the Rotarians could use a luncheon program, the debate squad could provide it, or that the department's broadcast facilities could provide the "cultural" programming that was ignored by commercial stations. Such activities may have been and probably often were positive responses to genuine community needs, but frequently it appears that decisions to serve have been made without consideration of long-term effects or comprehensive planning related to community problems and university resources.

The Objective of Community Service

Simply and generally stated, the objective of community service should be to build community. There appears to have been a great deal more certainty a generation ago that the speech communication activities cited here were the necessary and sufficient responses of departments to community needs. Such activities did, indeed, build community by displaying and reinforcing values of relatively stable and cohesive middle class communities. In 1972 there seem to be far fewer people who are willing to assert that they live in stable, cohesive community environments. And there appear to be many more people working within an academic framework who believe that their competencies and their responsibilities include more than reinforcement of the virtues of the D.A.R. and the American Legion.

Functional community service today must arise from a context, or an attitudinal set, or academic priority, of academic initiative, and of long-range goal-setting. It is no longer sufficient for a department, or any other university organizational unit, to treat service as the catch-all, miscellaneous category of professional behavior after the "real" work has been accounted for. Instead, service must assume an equality of importance with teaching and research.

Community service efforts are not likely to shift priorities until there is cumulative evidence of accomplishment. Unfortunately, perhaps, the occasional speech program, the theatre production series, and the speech clinic are frequently too hit-and-miss, or too limited, or too far removed from the central issues of community life to provide evidence for anything other than a reaffirmation

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of the ivory tower image. The needed evidence is the clear indication that there has been resolution of conflict between community groups, that community residents are part of the solution and not part of the problem, and that emerging problems are viewed as challenges rather than frustrations and deteriorations of community life. Such accomplishments are going to require initiative and action, for the ivory-tower bias currently makes it unlikely that the community will even be aware that the academician is a resource.

Meaningful action is not likely to occur unless there is long-range and comprehensive planning. In particular, the dynamic complexity of urban society suggests that concerted action over relatively long periods of time by task forces of individuals who combine their talents is necessary.

The BGSU/Chicano Program

Two activities at Bowling Green may illustrate the application of the future-oriented perspective being proposed. One of these activities is an on-going program with the Chicanos of Northwest Ohio--a program that is now more than four years old. The second activity is embryonic, may not even be realized, but is indicative of planning (or fantasizing, if you prefer) relevant to community service.

The Chicano program was developed as a response to an immediate need and a prediction of potentially greater difficulty in the future. Population data indicated that the Spanish-speaking resident count of Northwest Ohio was moving from 7,000 in 1963, 30,000 today, toward 100,000-150,000 in the next decade. Thus the problem was defined as not being merely an accomodation of today's community to its Chicano citizens. The definition also included the recognition of the future need for smoother transitions of the Mexican-American into the metropolitan complex.

Everyone is aware that the Chicanos are labelled as one of our nation's disadvantaged cultural minorities. Regretfully, that label has too often been taken to mean that the minority needs to be transformed into counterparts of the majority -- the "shape-up or ship-out" authoritarian stance. However, from the Chicano perspective, cultural disadvantage includes the threat of losing the Chicano identity. Our program has been based on the idea of serving as a cross-cultural bridge between the Chicano and the Anglo with the expectation that 1980 would find neither a "little Mexico" in Ohio nor 100,000 brown Anglos, complete with 1972 proportions of Anglo alcoholism, suicide, divorce and mental illness. One of the significant accomplishments of the program to date has been the increased awareness, tinged with envy, of the positive qualities of the Chicano culture on the part of most Anglos who have participated.

Twelve members of our department have been centrally involved in the Chicano program during the four years. It has been administered through our Center for Communication Studies in cooperation with our university's division of Continuing Education. Other professionals, from BGSU, three area colleges, and numerous governmental agencies, have also been involved as consultants or as participants.

The important point is that speech communication professionals have proved that they have the expertise to provide many of the services that are necessary to build community. Building community, in this case, has included the development of leadership skills, group cooperation, and organizational effectiveness within the Chicano culture and across the two cultures. My colleagues have brought their knowledge of discussion, persuasion, and organizational communication into use in what undoubtedly is one of the more significant problems of our urban area. Much remains to be done, the center and the department continue to be active, but results of prior action are evident. Chicano enrollment is up at BGSU, a number of our Chicano participants have assumed leadership positions in public and private organizations, and a number of Anglo-dominated organizations have begun to correct some of the unintended, but nonetheless existing, discrimin-

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ations perpetuated by ethnocentric myopia. Many Anglo-aggrandizing, intended exploitations remain to be dealt with, but the Chicanos themselves are showing increasing ability to differentiate between cross-cultural naivete and ethnic malice.

Speech Education for Community Service Roles

There is no action evidence to present in regard to the second example as there is with the Chicano program. Some of us have merely begun to think about long-term objectives for our departmental graduate programs. Now that there appears to be a decreasing market for teachers it seems essential to consider alternatives that might meet the needs of 1980 more functionally than the closed system of preparing teachers to prepare more teachers. Some of these alternatives have direct relevance for community service.

One consideration has been the development of speech communication professionals for roles analogous with or complementary to the role of urban planner. Proshansky and his colleagues have stated that

> "Environmental planning is no longer exclusively a product of the architect's drafting table. . . For years planners have operated on the basis of implicit notions of people's needs, and to a considerable degree their vast experience provided reasonable cues for each successive task. However, the tremendous increases in population and the great pressures to build make it necessary for the planner to have more systematic cues. (It is suggested) that the process of planning is an interdisciplinary task and that the greater use of multiple skills, the greater the possibility of an effectively designed environment."[2] p. 494.

This type of future-oriented perspective has promoted such ideas as "community entertainment planning" as an objective of study and training in speech and dramatic arts. People who understand the cultural necessity of drama and showmanship and who have the expertise to collect and assess information regarding community expectations toward theatre in its diverse forms and cultural variations should not have to think only in terms of single productions or single seasons. If such individuals were oriented and prepared to consider drama and entertainment in relation to community needs they could contribute significantly to more functional planning of urban environments.

Another area under consideration has been categorized as social or communication facilitation. It represents an extension of the educational concept of the teacher as a facilitator of learning. The teacher as facilitator does not define his role as controlling learning, but he attempts to maintain an environment in which the individual can define his problems, seek solutions for them, and thereby learn. Such facilitation, whether it is called that or not, is occurring regularly in public speech classes around the country on a one-to-one, teacher/student basis. Similarly, knowledge of groups, organizations and communities can be applied as facilitation. Such activities are already evident in our social role matrix--community development, organizational development, communication consultant, etc. What is not so evident, and could be, is the extensive contribution that speech communication can make in this area of social need (Ed. note: Facilitation through the named roles?).

The Community Service Mission

Whether or not these ideas can be adequately developed at BGSU remains to be seen, but past and present efforts to solve urban problems clearly indicate that economic analyses, even political analyses, fail to provide answers. The

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evolving perspective is that the urban dilemma is a people problem requiring solutions that take attitudes, expectations and interaction patterns into account. No group is better prepared than the speech communication profession to view the urban situation in these terms of communication relationships which build community or destroy it.

However, if the knowledge of speech action and speech response which identifies the discipline is going to be applied to realistic community service, a greater emphasis must be placed on the functional aspects of speech behavior. It is not sufficient to hold to what appears to be self-serving criteria of the traditionally artistic. For example, the Chicanos with whom I work speak neither Mexican-Spanish nor English in a manner acceptable to grammatical purists, but they cope, and in a responsive environment their attitudes and their expectations, their hopes and their frustrations, find expression.

It is in these terms that speech communication departments should define their urban community service mission. The need for constructive communication environments is evident, and it is time to set priorities, engage in future-oriented planning, and initiate comprehensive speech activities that can make a real difference in the urban condition.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Toffler, Alvin. Future Shock. New York: Random House, 1970.

[2]Proshansky, H., Ittelson, W., and Rivlin, L. (eds.), Environmental Psychology: Man and His Physical Setting. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970, p. 494.